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N.J. senators rebuffed on pay-to-play rule

Thursday, May 12, 2005

By **TOM HESTER JR.**
Staff Writer

U.S. Sens. Jon Corzine and Frank Lautenberg failed yesterday to convince the U.S. Senate to pass an amendment allowing New Jersey to place restrictions on transportation contracts for political donors.

Corzine and Lautenberg, both New Jersey Democrats, tried to add the amendment to a transportation bill, but their attempt was defeated 57-40.

"New Jersey is trying to do the right thing, and our state should be praised, not punished," Lautenberg said.

The issue loomed large earlier this year when the Federal Highway Administration determined the state's law, first signed as an executive order, violated competitive bidding regulations. The federal government withheld \$260 million in highway money for the state and threatened to continue withholding funding if the state didn't change the law.

The state filed a lawsuit, but a federal judge ruled against it and the Legislature eventually amended the law to exempt transportation contracts. Acting Gov. Richard J. Codey asked the state's Congressional delegation to amend federal law. The House agreed to the amendment in March, but the Senate hasn't followed suit.

The state law is designed to end the practice, dubbed pay-to-play, in which campaign donors are awarded with lucrative government contracts.

"The federal government is penalizing New Jersey and other states for enacting laws that reduce corruption and increase competition for federal contracts," Corzine said.

Codey said the state will continue to fight for the amendment.

NOTE: Contact State House bureau chief Tom Hester Jr. at thester@njtimes.com.

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